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ABSTRACT

This digest offers community college professionals insight into the culture and language driving the news media, with an emphasis on newspapers. In an era of increased accountability for resource expenditures, educators may stretch budgets by engaging the mass media as willing and helpful partners in promoting the institutions' identity, programs, and services in the media's regular news coverage. Colleges that have successfully worked with mass media understand that the media may help them not only to promote their programs and services but also to convey their college "identity" within the community. College leaders are most successful when they nurture relationships with mass media whose audiences are similar to the institutions' target markets. For articles that do not need to be timely and are featured in local or life-style sections, the editorial staff brainstorm stories that they believe will be of interest to their audience. It is in this realm of news stories that higher education may glean the most from successful relationships with the mass media. Knowing the news media's audience and how their college programs or services may benefit this audience, higher education professionals may propose ideas for news stories to reporters and editors or producers. (JA)

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Digest

September, 2000 EDO-JC-00-09

Learning the Culture and Language of the Media

By Jennifer A. Yee

Community college professionals and mass media specialists have the potential to establish symbiotic relationships that allow both to fulfill their missions to serve the public good. In an era of increased accountability for resource expenditures, educators may stretch their budgets by engaging the mass media as willing and helpful partners in promoting the institutions' identity, programs and services in the media's regular news coverage. Following are some helpful insights on understanding the culture and language driving the news media, with an emphasis on newspaper organizations.

Characteristics of Colleges with Successful Media Relationships

Marketing smarts. Colleges that have successfully worked with mass media understand that the media may help them not only to promote their programs and services, but also to convey their college "identity" within the community (Hastings, p. 8). Their board directors, chief executive officers, administrators and public relations professionals work together to present information consistent with the institutions' identity. It is important to note that the relationships between higher education and media professionals generate actual news stories that *differ* from advertising (paid air- or print-space) and cost the college only the expense of their on-going public relations efforts (Wallace, p. 42). College leaders are most successful when they nurture their relationships with mass media whose audiences are similar to the institutions' target markets (Daniel & Hastings, p. 1). The size of the local news audience will also affect coverage, as colleges are more likely to be covered in smaller markets.

Media-savvy professionals. Working with editors and reporters who always need ideas for news stories, higher education practitioners may provide media specialists with timely, accurate information about campus programs or immediate access to faculty or administrators, especially when the reporters need expert opinions about issues or campus controversies (Daniel, p. 16; Raisman, p. 22).

What Media Professionals Value

Helpfulness in doing their job. Journalists are "public servants [who] provide the public with the truth" (Raisman, p. 23). The constitution protects journalists' roles in investigating and publishing what they perceive to be the truth (Raisman, p. 21). Providing access to key sources such as college presidents, faculty and students allows them to do their job. Campuses employing full-time public relations professionals may facilitate access to these sources. The appearance of hiding or restricting the flow of information through one spokesperson may prevent a journalist from obtaining the information necessary to present a balanced story (Daniel, p. 16, 19; Thornton, p. 30, 34).

Honesty, accuracy and reliability. Journalists rely on their ability to trust their information sources. The higher education professionals who have consistently maintained open communication with the reporters who cover their campus are more likely to receive balanced, fair coverage in both good and bad times (Daniel, p. 19; Thornton, p. 29; Marquez, p. 35). By acknowledging the truth and consistently offering accurate information, higher education professionals may build solid relationships with their local news media.

Timeliness. Deadline pressures on journalists compel them to write stories based on the information they gather by the daily deadline. Generally, for a daily newspaper, the deadline for a current events story may be sometime in mid-afternoon. Reporters who call college offices and leave messages in the morning would benefit from being called back immediately if th[illegible]rk for a daily paper (Thornton, p. [illegible]. With the growing number of news web sites, the competition to report stories first increases the pressure on the reporter to gather information as quickly as possible.

Respect and ethics. While media professionals are often portrayed as being "out to get" a person or organization, journalists work best with those who are friends, in mutually beneficial relationships (Daniel, p. 19; Raisman, p. 21; Thornton, p. 29; Marquez, p. 35). These relationships are governed by strict ethical standards and do not involve expectations for returned favors (Daniel, p. 19). Ethics require journalists to seek out and report balanced news stories, with confidentiality promised to sources who may not otherwise speak because of feared repercussions. If a story is not published, reporters and editors should not be blamed. The college's story may be pushed aside in favor of a late-breaking incident and perhaps published at another time (Daniel, p. 17).

Norms That Drive Media Work

Business v. Editorial. Most news organizations are businesses. They rely on advertising and subscriptions to generate the revenues that not only pay for the operating expenses, but also make a profit for the organizations' owners. Advertising and readership subscriptions are interdependent; that is, the amount of readers determines how much the organization may charge for its advertising. And so, the business side of the news organization concerns itself with producing a news product that retains current readers *and* attracts new ones. This same revenue-generating formula does not necessarily apply to Internet news sites.

The editorial side of a news organization is usually what most

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people envision when they think of the media. Editors and reporters keep abreast of local, state, national and world news for late-breaking stories that usually appear on the front page or as late-breaking news broadcasts. For articles that do not need to be timely and are featured in local or life-style sections, the editorial staff brainstorm stories that they believe will be of interest to their audience. It is in this realm of news stories that higher education may glean the most from successful relationships with the mass media. Knowing the news media's audience and how their college programs or services may benefit this audience, higher education professionals may propose ideas for news stories to reporters and editors or producers. If their relationship is good, a simple phone pitch or fax from the college public relations professional to an editor may result in a story being covered.

Newshole. A newshole is the amount of print-space or air-time available to report the news. The size of the newshole is affected by the amount of advertising, which not only takes up print-space, but also determines the number of pages in the paper (how much the news organization can afford). At a daily newspaper, the newshole changes each day, and editors and their reporters are given a certain number of column inches to fill. The articles that are printed are prioritized according to newsworthiness. Thus, reporters not only attempt to complete a story by the press deadline, but they also compete with other reporters to have their stories printed.

Readership. Journalists are responsible for reporting the truth, as well as providing information and reading material of interest to the readership. The demographics and size of the readership, or the newspaper's circulation, greatly affects editorial priorities when filling the newshole. It is very important to know the demographics of the news organization's readership to see if it corresponds with the demographics of the audience you're trying to reach (Hastings, p. 55).

Understanding the Language That Media Professionals Speak

Understanding the journalistic jargon may help higher education professionals to establish more effective working relationships. There are several types of articles: the *news* story and the *feature* or *human interest* story. The *news* story reports facts, particularly the 5 Ws: *Who, What, When, Where, Why* (and *How much*). They begin with a *lead* paragraph that includes the 5 Ws, so that if the newshole is small, the entire story can be edited to the first paragraph. When a news story is reported as the event unfolds, it is considered *breaking news*. A news organization that reports a news story before any other organization has *scooped* the story. A *feature* story does not necessarily begin with a 5 Ws lead; rather it begins with a lead that hooks you into the story, and it is a longer piece that provides insight into a person, situation, program or event. Usually, the story will have an *angle* that makes it of interest to the readership. A feature story on a community college welfare-to-work program may be more interesting to readers if the reporter focuses on a person with similar demographics to the readership.

Reporters and news editors spend years honing their ability to identify a topic's *newsworthiness*, its timely relevance and appeal to readers. Well-written, newsworthy news or feature articles make *good copy*, text that is interesting and pleasurable to read. Higher education professionals who submit good copy to editors in the form of *press releases* should be sure to write them in the *style* that the news organization prefers. This ensures that the punctuation, usage of numbers, abbreviations, etc. are consistent with what the news organization already prints. Likewise, the higher education professional who understands that a reporter needs enough *lead time*—time to cover a story before the deadline—will win fans in the newsroom.

Conclusion

In essence, establishing positive collegial relationships with news media specialists requires not only the ability to maintain open communication, but also an understanding of the culture, norms and language that the media uses. When viewed this way, the mutually beneficial relationships between higher education and the mass media occur as a result of cross-cultural exchanges, and if all goes well, friendships.

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